

Book Review

Megan Bishop MOORE and Brad E. KELLE,

Biblical History and Israel's Past:

The Changing Study of the Bible and History

(Grand Rapids & Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans, 2011) pp. xvii + 518. Pb.

Published in *Mission Today* XIV/4 (2012) 381-383.

Writing a history of ancient Israel is not an easy task today, especially when one considers the unsettling debates between minimalists and maximalists. Moore and Kelle have done us a great service by helping us negotiate the maze of scholarly opinions on this difficult subject. The primary purpose of the writers is “to describe the changing study of Israelite and Judean history and the relationship of the biblical literature to that history since the 1970s” (p. 39). They seek to include in their comprehensive survey matters pertaining to “methodology, philosophy, evaluation and use of sources, and even implications of historical conclusions for biblical interpretation, all toward the aim of identifying the major trends in the scholarly study of Israel’s past since the 1970s” (p. 40). While all their opinions and conclusions will not go unchallenged, their accessible survey of the subject is certainly engaging and enlightening.

The book has 8 long chapters and an Afterword. Each chapter ends with a few questions for discussion and some suggestions for further reading. An appealing feature of the book is a good number of boxes with much background information. The book has a good bibliography (34 pages) and a helpful index (about 9 pages).

Chapter 1 is a long ‘Introduction’ (pp. 1-42), aimed at familiarizing the reader with the complexity of the subject. Chapter 2 (pp. 43-76) examines the problematic question of the historicity of ‘the Patriarchs and Matriarchs’ in the Bible. Chapter 3 is a careful consideration of the much-discussed topic of ‘Israel’s Emergence’ (pp. 77-144). The reader will certainly appreciate the succinct yet clear presentations of complex scholarly perspectives. Chapter 4 (pp. 145-199) is part 1 of ‘the Monarchical Period’. It aims at offering an overview of the assumptions and implications of the changing evaluation of the sources concerning this period. Chapter 5 (pp. 200-265), which is part 2 of ‘the Monarchical Period’, studies the first kings and the beginnings of permanent government in Israel. Chapter 6 (pp. 266-333), part 3 of ‘the Monarchical Period’, has a long discussion of the Iron Age kingdoms of Israel and Judah. While they will no doubt invite some scholarly criticism, these three chapters offer a healthy corrective to overoptimistic approaches to the monarchical period in the history of Israel and Judah. Chapter 7 (pp. 334-395) dwells on what the authors consider ‘a long-ignored area’ of study: ‘the Exilic Period’. In harmony with modern critical scholarship, they prefer to consider it under the broader designation of ‘the Neo-Babylonian Period’. Chapter 8 (pp. 396-464) delves into ‘the

Postexilic or Persian Period’, an era marked by ‘limited evidence’. The discussion here is certainly an eye-opener.

Moore and Kelle draw their book to a conclusion with an ‘Afterword’ on the question, ‘What is the future of Israel’s past?’ (pp. 465-475). Among other things, here they show their sensitivity to faith-based approaches to epistemology and history. “Perhaps”, they say, “the best hope is for future efforts to take seriously both the effect of historical research on conceptions of the Bible’s authority and inspiration and the import of historians’ faith commitments for their interpretations” (p. 471). This they feel can lead to a fruitful dialogue. Further, they call for a broader and more integrative approach in future studies of the history of Israel, an approach that takes into consideration the broader social, cultural and human phenomena that shaped that history.

This is a timely and welcome book. Students who have felt comfortable with books such as J. M. Miller and J. H. Hayes, *A History of Ancient Israel and Judah* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, ²2006) and John Bright, *A History of Israel: With an Introduction and Appendix by William P. Brown* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, ⁴2000) will find in this book much to reckon with. It will serve them as a good supplement to traditional textbooks on biblical history. Scholars will find it a point of reference and a point of departure as they seek to renegotiate the tough terrain of the study of Israel’s hallowed past. And whether they like it or not, this book will provoke them to do some serious rethinking of the subject under scrutiny.

by

Bro. Abraham M. Antony, SDB

amathilakam@gmail.com